

Sunday Townball

**Mid-Missouri teams
in the 30s and 40s
skinned diamonds,
piled in stock trucks
and played good ball.**

Story by Gary Partney



THE PORTLAND CORNO-FEEDERS, 1931. Gus Holzhauser owned the general store in Portland and did business with the St. Louis Corno Feed Company. He got the company to buy uniforms for local men who had a passionate love for baseball. Top row, from left to right: Howard Holzhauser, Mat Neal, Boss Perkeson, Adolph Holzhauser, and Albert Holzhauser. Bottom row: Gus Holzhauser, Lawrence Tate, Dick Holzhauser, Royal Tate, Stanley Holzhauser, and little Richard Holzhauser. The team lasted only two years, but went 18 and 2 in 1931. Photo courtesy of Royal Tate.

In 1931, the town of Portland was a mecca of farmers, produce truckers, railroad men and good baseball players.

Commerce reigned in the town of Portland. Speeding trains, both passenger and freight, on the MKT Railroad screeched to a stop at the Portland station. Two general stores and a hotel to accommodate salesmen graced the sloping mainstreet, and farmers trucked in railroad ties to trade for flour and illegal whiskey.

And in 1931, a beloved diversion from the town's business was baseball.

The young men of Portland had a passion for the sport. It was both a practical pastime and symbol of a glorified ideal played out in far away major league parks.

It became "organized," they say about baseball in the river bottom towns. Even more organized than in some of the bigger towns like Columbia.

No serious leagues existed, just "townball." The county high schools at that time didn't have their own diamonds to drag, and American Legion teams wouldn't come along until after World War II.

So, the young men, 14 and up, shouldered Louisville bats, tucked stubby mitts under an arm and came out to play after work and on weekends. Each town, Portland, Mokane, Tebbetts, or Chamois, just to name a few, had a team, a sponsor and a following.

In Portland, the youthful enclave was annointed by the owner of a general store, Gus Holzhauser, a man in his late 30s, who by virtue of a thriving business with the St. Louis Corno Feed Company, was able to procure uniforms.

Holzhauser himself held down the position of third base for the team that became known as the Portland Corno-feeders.

Royal Tate was left fielder and a river man who married Holzhauser's daughter. Tate still lives in Portland on a Corps of Engineers' pension.

He says his father-in-law "manipulated the company into buying the uniforms. "They were hot," he says, but the uniforms transformed a conglomeration of baseball-worshipping boys into an organized team, the members of which became "pretty fair ballplayers," Tate recalls.

The players donned the gray, loose-fitting suits and went out most Sundays between Easter and October to a flat hollow near Eagle Creek, which they had skinned for a diamond and cut for an outfield. Sometimes they went on the road. "Every little town had a ball team. And the community would follow everywhere they went. The majority of our ball team would travel in a 'straight' truck to other towns, or when we played Chamois, we would ferry across the river and the other team would pick us up," Tate says.

The Corno-feeders gelled naturally and immediately as an extension of earlier adolescent get-together teams, which had conformed less to the daily exigency of work.

In 1931, the team was unreckoned with by most other ball clubs in the townball circuit in Callaway, Cole, Montgomery and Osage counties. The Corno-feeders won 18 and lost 2.

One of those losses, recalls Tate, came against the Rhineland team. The ball club had a young pitcher by the name of Douglas.

Tate says the 6-4 right-hander beat the Corno-feeders by throwing wild. "He could throw through a board fence. You could never get dug in because he was just as likely to throw behind you."

Tate, who says he was one of the best hitters on the team, maintained a batting average of .400 against good country pitchers such as Ralph Huffmaster and Roy Dixon. Most teams, he says, practiced on weeknights and scored each weekend game. "It took some time and some sweat," Tate says.

If the Portland team hadn't found a company name to arc across the back of its uniforms, it would have probably been known simply as the Holzhauser ball team. Seven out of 11 players claimed the name of the ubiquitous Portland family.

One of them was Adolph Holzhauser. His curveball had earned him a spot on the American Association Kansas City Blues and before that on the St. Paul minor league team. The hurler returned to Portland, though, after he suffered a

career-halting injury.

One rainy day in K.C. in 1930, according to Tate, the Portland boy with the golden arm had been forced by the manager to pitch two consecutive outings for Kansas City in order to placate the owner of the team.

"A major league scout was coming to town the day after Holzhauser pitched. The



The 1947 Tebbetts Blue Jays team was organized by Ralph Huffmaster, a mail carrier with a truck. He used the truck to transport from town to town during World War II, but teams were few, and gas was scarce. After the war, townball teams started up again and the Turner brothers supplied the truck. Top row, from left to right: Pat Rasubaul, Edgar Perrey, Ralph Huffmaster, Howard Holzhauser. Middle Row: Charles Roots, unidentified, Glen Burre, Don Jones. Front row: W.C. Link, Harold Turner, Herb Stoll, Fritz Burre, Chester Turner, Frank Buffa. Photo courtesy of Chester Turner.

owner of the team was looking to make some money," Tate recalls.

"He said he didn't want to pitch again. But the manager told him to anyhow. He didn't go just a little ways when something popped in his arm."

Because of his arm injury, Holzhauser eventually faded from minor league rosters. Still, with the Corno-feeders, "ate remembers that the pitcher who always wore the K.C. uniform and threw an overhand curveball "outclassed anything we were used to."

"The bottom just dropped out of it."

Another player of memorable talent on the Corno-feeders was a slingshot-armed catcher, Lawrence Tate, Royal's brother.

Tate, if recognized by scouts, had a legitimate crack at the majors. The 19-year-old catcher always threw from the squatting position, and few rival players had enough confidence in their own speed to attempt to steal second while Tate's brother played behind the plate.

The team's outfielder, Stanley Holzhauser, who also lives in Portland describes Lawrence Tate's famous arm by lining up his thumb to his ear and releasing a cocked forearm like a loosed arrow.

"You talk about reflexes. That pitcher had to duck or dive out of the way, or he would get it right between the eyes."

Stanley Holzhauser claims he himself would have made one of the Branch Rickey Cardinal farm clubs if it hadn been for competition from some future baseball greats. But he says it was the young catcher alone on the Portland team who was good enough to play major league baseball.

"His arm was as good as Johnny Bench's, and he could hit, too."

The demise of the team came suddenly. It came with a tragic ring to it just two years after the team formed.

Lawrence Tate worked for the railroad on a paint gang. "When it was hot, heiked to stand by the trains and catch the breeze," recalls his brother.

A moving train suddenly ended Lawrence Tate's baseball career one summer day in Portland as he was catching the breeze. "They say something must have hit him," his brother says.

Another Corno-feeder, second baseman Albert Holzhauser, was in his 40s, the oldest man on the team. He died of a heart attack that same year.

The Portland baseball team at times had trouble fielding nine players, and the town's supply of ballplayers willing to practice during the week and play in their towns was exhausted.

Royal Tate and Stanley Holzhauser went

on to play ball elsewhere — Tate with Mokane and Tebbetts and Holzhauser with the Jefferson City team — but Tate says, "The team disbanded and didn't play anymore after my brother and the second baseman died. Some of the others went on to play for Tebbetts and Mokane."

Like most townball fields, the Eagle Creek diamond has been reclaimed by Nature. The footprints of Sunday's lemonade-sipping fans were blown away three generations ago, and the field is now overgrown and unrecognizable.

"Nothing is there to resemble a ball diamond," Tate says.

Nothing is left but memories, says the two surviving Corno-feeders, who occasionally travel to Busch stadium for a Cardinal game. And both remember one game with the Fulton Buffaloes, a black team, that was known for its offensive prowess.

Power on the Buffaloes was provided most often by the ball-playing Bagby brothers, Lincoln, Harper, Cletus and Raymond. It was Raymond Bagby that skied one to left field in a game against the Corno-feeders.

Even though Tate was the regular left fielder, Stanley Holzhauser says he was camped in left that day. "As soon as the ball was hit, I knew it was gone and I just turned around and started running. I dove under the left field fence, got the ball, and threw it as far as I could."

"Uncle Gus came out from first base and took the throw and relayed it to home." The outfield fence in Portland, Holzhauser says, consisted of a single-wire fence.

The throw to the plate is said to have cut down Bagby, whose loping run is remembered as that of a man who just hit one into oblivion.

"Everytime he saw me after that, Bagby accused me of having a ball in my pocket," Holzhauser says.

Portland won the game. But it might have been considered an upset.

"We generally won," recalls Winford Brown, a catcher and an occasional pitcher for the Buffaloes.

The Buffaloes also beat with regularity the Fulton All-Stars and Claude West's West Wonders, the two white teams in Fulton.

The way Brown tells it, more competition was to be had from the Tebbetts ball club, particularly right after the war. He remembers "there were some good ballplayers down there."

These teams differed from the Portland club. The depth of their benches reached down through three generations. Brown's wife, Lois, who used to go out to the games

at Priest Field and the old Callaway County fairgrounds to "watch her man play ball," says the black league went back as long as she can remember. She says that the team was around in the early '20s and lasted until American Legion ball took over in the late '40s, although no men were around to swing the bat during the war.

Segregation in sports, among other aspects of American life, was still alive, so black teams like the Fulton Buffaloes competed more often against other black teams, traveling to Columbia, Mexico, Jefferson City, Higginsville, and Moberly.

Brown gives a nod, confident in the accuracy of his memory. "We generally won," he says again. In fact, the only team that beat the Buffaloes with regularity, says Brown, was the Missouri State Penitentiary team. "They were a mean looking bunch. I didn't like those gates slammed at my back."

Local black players who might have had pro-talent were also barred pretty much from the minor leagues, according to the Browns.

Lois Brown says she remembers that two players "from the old team," Raymond Bagby and Edward Brown, went away for a couple of weeks and must have been trying out for the minor leagues.

Following the departure of the two local players there was "big talk," says Lois, since thumbs were still down on blacks playing in the minors. The two Fulton players returned to Fulton, she says, to finish their ball-playing days.

Another player for the Buffaloes who might have been good enough to play pro ball, says Brown's wife, was Arnold Ray McBride. His son Bake McBride did make the big leagues, playing center field for the St. Louis Cardinals and the Philadelphia Phillies. She also recalls a one-armed pitcher who threw a whistling fastball for the Buffaloes, Herman Johnson. The players called him "Wingy."

Winford Brown cherishes his connection to all of these players, but perhaps more to Raymond "Big Bagby" who could knock a ball out of any park.

"Bagby was a sucker for curveballs," Brown claims. And one time, after Bagby had gone over to play with the Jefferson City Mohawks in 1946, Brown found himself on the mound facing his former teammate. "I threw him nothing but curveballs. I struck him out."

Lois Brown adds, "(Bagby) told me that hurt him for years."

In the '30s, other teams such as Reform and Tebbetts, were made up of 16- and 17-year-olds who would later join the service, come home, and renew their devotion to townball.

In 1936 and 1937, Edgar Garrett, who owned the general store in Reform, started his own team. Garrett's club played in the Calwood and Red Star area. One of the ballplayers was Vince Boone. Boone hopped from one ball team to the next. His townball career illustrates the network of

teams in Callaway County.

"I played a year with Mokane and two years with the West Wonders. I played two years with the Tweedies in Jefferson City, which was managed by Claude McClure, and I played nine years of hardball with Tebbetts."

According to Boone, Townball "picked up real good after the war," and the place to play was Tebbetts. The Tebbetts Blue Jays had been organized in 1940, by Ralph Huffmaster, a mail carrier with a truck. There weren't enough 4-F's around during the war to keep the league going, particularly when gas was rationed, which prevented teams from traveling to the opponent's park.

"After the war is when Fritz Burre, Vince and Wayne Boone, Frank Buffa and all of those guys played for us," recalls Chester Turner, who played on the team with his brother, Harold. "We had one of the best teams around." Even Buzzy Holzhauser of Portland, whose uncles were Corno-feeders, eventually came to play on the team. (Howard Holzhauser, a Corno-feeder, was already playing with Tebbetts)

Tebbetts also had one of the best fields around. It didn't need too much river sand to level it, claims Turner, who says crowds of 100 people or more sometimes turned out to watch the Jays play. The fans paid 50 cents to get in and sat in wooden stands.

The gate, like most townball revenue from ticket sales, was split 60-40, with the bigger end going to the home team. Supporters, usually children, wives and girlfriends, would follow the team to Shelbyna, Huntsville, Eldon, Vienna, Iberia and even Belle, where an outfielder couldn't see the pitcher's head.

But the Tebbetts team and all of the town ball teams gradually gave way to American Legion ball and, eventually, high school teams.

The pride of Tebbetts, backstop and all, has been paved over. A house sits on the pitcher's mound. More than anything, Turner says, the reason the teams faded was because "we got old and had other things to do."

But all the players reminisce. They will drop what they are doing and talk for hours if they have an interested listener, which makes one wonder. Did all these teams play that well or are these men romanticizing, padding their batting averages, adding 30 feet to their arms, two steps to a 90-foot sprint?

Frank Buffa says, "We had a lot of real good ballplayers that would have at least played major league ball."

Stanley Holzhauser says, "I could throw a ball 300 feet easy."

Do men glorify their ball playing days? "Sure," says Buffa while pumping gas at his station in Fulton.

But when he describes his ability to hit wicked curveball thrower Raymond Basinger, he spits an easy epithet: "I hit him like I owned him."



The Fulton Buffaloes traded uniforms bearing merchants names for American Legion uniforms in 1946. The club was known for its powerful hitters. Top row, from left to right: Winford Brown Sr., James Pittman, Raymond Bradford, unidentified, unidentified, William C. McDonald, Cornell Pasley and unidentified. Front row: William Lyons, Eugene Lawson, Jack McBride, Cletus Bagby and Peter Norman. Not pictured is "Big" Raymond Bagby. Photo courtesy of Winford and Lois Brown.